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A PLEA FOR A NATIONAL LIBRARY

2
“IT is a fact, pregnant with meaning, that the nations which possess the most extensive libraries maintain the foremost rank in civilization.” Canada enjoys the dubious distinction of ranking with Siam and Abyssinia in at least one respect,—none of the three possesses a national library. This wealthy, young nation, proud of the educational facilities it offers, lacks the very keystone of a really national system of education. Proud, too, of our intellectual heritage, we have forgotten that England and France possess the greatest national libraries that the world has ever seen. Here some one will surely object, for it is a popular delusion, that we have a national library in the Library of Parliament. But is the Library of Parliament a national library? Does it fulfil, or is it intended to fulfil, any of the functions of a national library? No one familiar with the work of the great national libraries of other lands can believe this. The Library of Parliament is a legislative library, pure and simple; it was created to serve the needs of parliament, not of the public. So absolutely is this the case that when some one raised the question in the House of Commons a few years ago, both the prime minister and the leader of the opposition declared that even the slight privileges then allowed to the public should be abolished, and the library preserved for the exclusive use of parliament. Recognizing the purely legislative character of the Library of Parliament, there is nothing to criticize in the attitude taken by the leaders.

On the other hand, if this were in any real sense a national library, one could not too severely condemn such a position. As it stands, the discussion really has helped to pave the way towards a movement for a national library,

by removing from the Library of Parliament even the shadow of a function that was other than legislative. A legislative and a national library combined in one does not necessarily constitute an anomaly. The Library of Congress at Washington furnishes a brilliant example of such a combination. But it is a rare combination; one that only the genius of the present Librarian of Congress has made practicable; and one the ultimate wisdom of which is open to question. In most countries the practice is to maintain a national library and a legislative library as separate and quite distinct institutions, each devoted to its own peculiar functions. In Washington, the Library of Congress is not only the national library and the library of Congress, but it also embraces the national archives. In Ottawa, we have a legislative library, and a national archives, under separate management, and it is doubtful if any one familiar with the operation of the two institutions would think of recommending their combination under one head, either as they stand, or as parts of a still greater organization to include also a national library. What is really needed is a Canadian national library, working in harmony with the two existing institutions, but filling its own field, a field which belongs neither to the national archives nor to the legislative library.

Lest there be doubt as to the peculiarly isolated position of Canada in this respect, let us see what the attitude of other countries is towards a national library. We may exclude, for the present, the United States and the great nations of Europe, and confine ourselves to such countries as are more or less on a level with Canada in wealth and population. Most of them, it will be seen, are less able than we are to support a national library. The Koninklijke Bibliotheek, at The Hague, contains over half a million volumes. This magnificent national library is open the year round to all students who may wish to take advantage of its privileges. It not only offers every facility for research within its walls, but permits students to borrow books for

work at home, and this privilege is not confined to the capital. The Koninklijke Bibliotheek is, in the truest sense, a national library. It is maintained for the benefit of the people of Holland. Books may be borrowed by residents of The Hague for a period of two weeks, and students elsewhere in Holland are permitted to keep books for a month.

The people of Switzerland, in their Stadt Bibliotheek at Berne, possess an equally efficient and broadly accessible national library of some two hundred thousand volumes, housed in a new building carefully planned to meet all the needs of such an institution. The books in this library are absolutely free to residents of every part of Switzerland. A student in the most remote hamlet may send a request to the capital for any work he needs, and if it is available, he gets it by mail, without any unnecessary formalities or other expenses than the actual cost of transportation. He may borrow as many as six volumes at a time.

The Kongelige Bibliotheek, at Copenhagen, offers the use of its 650,000 volumes to all the people of Denmark. Its books are preserved in a splendid building, equipped with every modern facility, and they are carefully classified and catalogued. As in Holland and Switzerland they are available to students throughout the country.

What has been said of these countries applies pretty generally to the national library of Sweden, at Stockholm (320,000 volumes); to the Norwegian national library at Christiania (100,000 volumes); to the national library of Greece, at Athens (305,000 volumes); to the Bibliothèque Royale at Brussels (600,000 volumes); and to the Bibliotheca Nacional at Lisbon (400,000 volumes). That it applies also to the great national libraries of England, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, Austria, and Spain, goes without saying, but the object here has been to confine consideration to the smaller countries of Europe, which in population and wealth stand more or less on a footing with Canada. In so far as they are weaker than this country, the comparison is damaging to us and to our self-respect; all the more so, since, over some

of them at least, we have been inclined to feel an intellectual superiority. If the small countries of Europe have been able and willing to build up strong national libraries, and make them actually national that every citizen may reap the benefit of their accumulated treasures, the isolation of Canada is humiliating indeed.

But we have not yet sounded the depths of our humiliation as a civilized—one cannot honestly say an intellectual—nation. If we have felt ourselves rather superior in most ways to the smaller countries of Europe, the feeling has been even more marked when we have condescended to think at all of the countries of South America. What must we feel, then, when we discover that each of the South American republics possesses its *Bibliotheca Nacional*? The national library at Buenos Ayres contains a quarter of a million books, pamphlets and manuscripts, including the most complete collection of works on South America. An annual appropriation of about \$85,000, with an efficient staff, and a broad and intelligent system of administration, enables the institution to take its proper place as an important part of the educational system of the country. The national library at Santiago, with its 145,000 volumes of printed and manuscript material, and its excellent bulletins and special publications, is performing the same service for the people of Chile. So is the national library at Rio de Janeiro, for the people of Brazil; and, in a lesser degree, the interests of the citizens of the other South American republics are served by the national libraries at Lima, Bogota, Quito, Montevideo, Caracas, and Asuncion. Let it be repeated that these are national libraries, not legislative or parliamentary libraries. In most, if not all, cases in Europe and South America, a legislative library is maintained quite apart from the national library.

Mexico, too, has her *Bibliotheca Nacional*, with some two hundred thousand volumes, housed in one of the most beautiful buildings on the continent, classified according to the decimal system of Namur, accessible to the students

of the country, and supported by an annual appropriation of about \$65,000. Here, also, the national library is not intended to serve the needs of the Houses of Congress, each of which has its own special legislative library. Even Cuba may boast of its national library; and, to reach the very lowest depths of our humiliation, the despised little Central American republics of Costa Rica and Honduras each possesses what we lack—a national library.

May we bring Japan into the discussion? Japan is now recognized as one of the great nations of the earth; but is any Canadian content to admit that this people, whom we counted only a few short years ago as semi-barbarous, should teach us how to make the most of available educational facilities? Content or not, we cannot do otherwise than admit that we have done nothing, where they have been singularly successful. The Imperial Library of Japan, with a quarter of a million books, embraces not only the classics of Japan and China, but also the cream of European literature. It is preserved in a handsome, modern building, embodying the best features of European and American libraries. It is open all the year round; its books are freely accessible to all the people of Japan; and it has already exerted a powerful influence upon the growth of public libraries throughout the empire, and upon the intellectual development of the people.

It is, perhaps, too much to expect the Commonwealth of Australia to attempt the establishment of a national library until it has had time to settle in its much-discussed national capital; but at any rate the governments of the two principal states of the Commonwealth have long since proved their faith in national libraries. The Public Library of New South Wales is supported generously by the state, and its books are not merely accessible to the people of Sydney, but may be borrowed by country libraries, groups of students, or individuals, anywhere in New South Wales, free of charge. The Public Library at Melbourne performs the same service for the people of Victoria. Each of these

libraries contains about a quarter of a million volumes, and this number is growing rapidly from year to year.

The Imperial Library at Calcutta (100,000 volumes), in which both Lord Curzon and Lord Minto have taken a deep and intelligent interest, is designed to fulfil the duty of a national library to the people of India, native as well as European. It still falls a long way short of the requirements of such a huge constituency, but it is being developed along right lines, and that is, after all, the main consideration.

It is clear, then, that the rest of the civilized world has found use, and good use, for a national library. Are we Canadians either so inferior, or so superior, to the rest of the world, that we cannot use, or do not need, such an institution? Surely not. Those of us who are healthy-minded believe that as a nation we are neither better nor worse than our fellows; and that the things that are good for them, broadly speaking, are good for us. What almost limitless possibilities of usefulness would follow the establishment of a properly-constituted Canadian national library! With the experience of the greatest and most efficient foreign libraries before us, we could borrow from each those features that would most readily adapt themselves to our own peculiar needs. We could, as Japan has so successfully done, adopt our neighbours' successful practices, and reject their failures.

Broadly speaking, the Library of Congress—or, as it is now generally called, the National Library of the United States—offers the most useful model for our guidance. In practical efficiency, and in adaptation to the requirements of a democratic population, that library stands easily first. Moreover, in the geographical distribution of its constituents, it faces a situation very similar to our own, and entirely different from the position occupied by the great European libraries. The national libraries of England and France, for instance, are reference libraries, in the strictest sense of the term. No books may be removed from the British Museum or the Bibliothèque Nationale upon any pretext whatever. Such a system, in which there are manifest

advantages, is admirably adapted to those countries; but it is not at all adapted to the needs of Canada or the United States. It is no particular hardship to the student in the British Isles or France, wherever his home may be, to travel to London or Paris for the works he must consult. On the other hand, to many students in the United States or Canada it would be a practical impossibility to visit personally the national libraries in Washington or Ottawa. In one case, the extreme distance is not more than five hundred miles; in the other, it may be anywhere up to three thousand miles.

Facing, then, this very practical problem, the National Library of the United States has, though not before long and grave consideration, come to the conclusion that when its constituents cannot come to it, it must go to them. That has been a momentous decision; one, indeed, of the utmost consequence to thousands of students. As we have seen, the same practice has been adopted by the national libraries of several other countries. In their cases, however, it is of comparatively slight importance; while on this continent it is of vital significance. To Canada, as to the United States, the circulation of books from a national library to students outside the capital, would be of supreme importance. In fact, the measure of its practical efficiency would depend more upon the acceptance of the idea of a national circulation than upon any other principle of library administration.

Such a principle does not necessarily involve the unrestricted circulation of books from the national library throughout the country. No national library can depart altogether from the principle of a reference collection. There is a safe mean, however, between the rigid rule of a purely reference library, and the scattering of books broadcast. Such a mean would be found in this country by making the national library the centre of a system of which the provincial libraries, or the principal municipal libraries, would be members. A student, say, in Edmonton, or St. John, would apply through the provincial library, or the

public library, as the case might be, for a work in the national library, and the book would be sent to the local library to be used there, the borrower paying transportation from and to Ottawa. The local library would become responsible to the national library for the safety of the book. Similarly, college libraries would have the privilege of borrowing books from the national library for their students.

Out of such a practice would develop the principle that public and college libraries should restrict their accessions to books of direct interest to their local readers or students; provincial libraries would include a wider range of subjects, suited to the general needs of the province; and the national library would embrace the whole range of human knowledge, including the innumerable body of special treatises, reports, pamphlets, etc., which, because they are only very occasionally called for, cannot profitably be given shelf-room in any collection that is not national in scope, and that yet must, sooner or later, be of importance to some special student.

One dare not attempt, in this limited space, to outline the many directions in which such national libraries as that of the United States have not merely justified their existence, but become factors of great value in the lives of the people. The following passages, however, from an address by Dr. Herbert Putnam, to whose splendid executive ability and broad grasp of essentials the national library of the United States owes its phenomenal success, will serve better than any words of mine to illustrate the opportunities for usefulness of such an institution:

"Suppose there could be a collection of books universal in scope, as no local library with limited funds and limited space can hope to be: a collection which shall contain also particularly (1) original sources, (2) works of high importance for occasional reference, but whose cost to procure and maintain precludes their acquisition by a local library pressed to secure the material for ordinary and constant need, and (3) the 'useless' books; books not costly to acquire, but of so little general concern as not to justify cataloguing, space, and

care in each local library, if only they are known to be preserved and accessible somewhere. Such a collection must include also the general mass of books sought and held by local libraries—the books for the ordinary reader, the daily tools of research. Its maintenance will involve processes—of classification and cataloguing—highly costly. Suppose the results of these processes could be made generally available, so as to save duplication of such expenditure upon identical material held by local libraries.

“A collection universal in scope will afford opportunity for bibliographic work not equalled elsewhere. Such work centred there might advance the general interest with the least aggregate effort. The adequate interpretation of such a collection will involve the maintenance of a corps of specialists. Suppose these specialists could be available to answer inquiries from all parts of the country as to what material exists on any particular subject, where it is, how it may be had, how most effectively it may be used.

“There are various bibliographic undertakings which may be co-operative. Suppose there could be at Washington a central bureau—with approved methods, standard forms, adequate editorial capacity, and liberal facilities for publication—which could organize and co-ordinate this work among the libraries of the United States and represent them in such of it as—like the new Royal Society Index—is to be international.

“If there can be such a thing as a bibliographic bureau for the United States, the Library of Congress is in a way to become one; to a degree, in fact, a bureau of information for the United States. Besides routine workers, efficient as a body, it has already some expert bibliographers and, within certain lines, specialists. Besides its own employees, it has within reach by telephone a multitude of experts. They are maintained by the very government which maintains it. They are learned men, efficient men, specially trained, willing to give freely of their special knowledge Of these men, in the scientific bureaus at Washington, the

National Library can take counsel; it can secure their aid to develop its collections and to answer inquiries of moment. This will be within the field of the natural and physical sciences. Meantime, within its walls it possesses already excellent capacity for miscellaneous research, and special capacity for meeting inquiries in history and topography, in general literature, and in the special literature of economics, mathematics, and physics.

"The library is already issuing publications in book form. In part these are catalogues of its own contents; in part an exhibit of the more important material in existence on some subject of current interest, particularly, of course, in connection with national affairs. Even during the period of organization, fifteen such lists have already been issued. They are distributed freely to libraries and even to individual inquirers.

"The Library of Congress is now primarily a reference library. But if there be any citizen who thinks that it should never lend a book to another library—in aid of the higher research—when the book can be spared from Washington and is not a book within the proper duty of the local library to supply—if there be any citizen who thinks that for the National Library to lend under these circumstances would be a misuse of its resources and, therefore, an abuse of trust—he had better speak quickly, or he may be too late. Precedents may be created which it would be awkward to ignore."

This address of Dr. Putnam's was made nearly ten years ago. Since then, what he suggested as possibilities have become accomplished facts, and these are only a few of the directions in which the National Library of the United States has now taken its place as the greatest single educational factor in the country. Allowing for differences of degree, what has been done by the National Library at Washington for students all over the United States, might as readily be accomplished by a national library at Ottawa for the people of the Dominion.

There is always difficulty in breaking ground for a new project, however worthy and however real the need that it would fill. There exist, however, certain circumstances which, assuming a sympathetic attitude on the part of the government might serve as a foundation. It is well known that for years past the Library of Parliament has been so crowded for space, books being shelved two and even three deep, that its usefulness has been seriously affected. The architectural plan of the present building makes it practically impossible to add to the shelving within the chamber, and absolutely impossible to enlarge the building itself. It is thought necessary, therefore, either to find room elsewhere for the books crowded out of the present chamber, or to build a new library. These are the alternatives that have hitherto presented themselves. But there is a third alternative. Let the government adopt the policy of a national library; erect a suitable building for its accommodation in some central locality; and remove from the Library of Parliament to the national library all books and other material that would properly find a place in such an institution, but which serve no very useful purpose in a pure legislative library. Of the books at present crowded into the Library of Parliament, probably two-thirds could be removed to a national library without affecting the value of the collection for legislative purposes. This would leave, say, one hundred thousand volumes in the Library of Parliament, embracing all material which would have any definite value as legislative material. Any other work that might occasionally be required for parliamentary use, would still be readily accessible in the national library. Here, then, we would have some two hundred thousand volumes as the nucleus of a Canadian national library, a nucleus around which it would be possible in a few years to build a noble collection of books.

To go even one step further, in anticipating what might be, an ideal site for a national library lies ready to the hand of the government. Sir Wilfrid Laurier has repeatedly expressed the opinion—one which every intelligent person

must share—that the building occupied by the Printing Bureau is an eyesore, and should be removed. Now, from the practical point of view of the Bureau itself, we have the opinion, embodied in the recent report of the Secretary of State, that the present building is inadequate, and that the needs of the Bureau demand a larger building on a more commodious site. It would be a comparatively easy matter to secure a satisfactory site for the Printing Bureau elsewhere, leaving the present site for a national library building that would harmonize with the existing buildings on Parliament Hill and with the new departmental block which is to face Major Hill Park. The national library would then be within easy reach of the archives, the Library of Parliament, and all the government departments, and, as has been done in Washington, it could, if necessary, be connected with the other government buildings by pneumatic tubes, for the conveyance of both messages and books.

If it were thought preferable to adopt the Washington plan, and combine the national and the legislative library in one, the proposed site would still be the best available. The present library chamber could then be used purely as a reading-room, similar to the reading-rooms in the British Museum and the rotunda of the Library of Congress. The bulk of the books could still be removed to the national library building, and conveyed thence by pneumatic tubes to the reading-room on Parliament Hill, as they might be called for.

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